

Scholar Extraordinary: The Achievement of Prof. D. Ramakrishna as Critic and Creative Writer

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There may be born poets, and there indeed have been plenty of them, but scholars are almost always made, often self-made at that. Prof. Devarakonda Ramakrishna is one such highly accomplished scholar (and creative writer) who made and remade himself constantly and finally emerged as a model for other scholars. He dedicated his entire life to the teaching of English literature and research at Kakatiya University, Warangal, India. He is among the very few scholars of India who reached the pinnacle of success in their careers. Now many years into his retirement, and unlike a large majority of other similarly placed teachers, he continues to be active as a scholar and creative writer regularly publishing articles and full-length books of criticism on a variety of literary and cultural subjects and creative works of high artistic values.

Unparalleled Scholar of American Literature

His odyssey as a scholar started with his developing keen interest in the American writer Edgar Allan Poe whose works he studied for his doctoral dissertation. This interest has stayed with him up until now, which again is exceptional in India. Although he occasionally diversified into other areas, especially Indian Writing in English, he has continued to work on Poe with remarkable regularity, resulting in five works of criticism—three authored by him and two edited volumes. The first of these works, *Explorations in Poe* (1992), studies the immense variety of Poe's themes and techniques in eleven chapters. For example, he explores the techniques of the detective story in Poe's "Thou Art the Man" in the article entitled "Explorations in the World of Comedy," and accounts for Poe's failure as a novelist in the article on *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), Poe's only complete novel. The book also deals with the affinities of Poe's *Eureka: A Prose Poem* (1848) with Hindu Philosophy, the Gothic theme in the short story "Ligeia" (1838), Poe's treatment of African-Americans and native Americans, his essential humanism, and his concern for the contemporary popular literature which aligns him with modern popular culture studies.

Prof. Ramakrishna's second book on Poe, *The Craft of Poe's Tales* (2000), which is based on his Ph.D thesis as revised during his Fulbright Fellowship at the University of Texas at Austin, seeks to systematically apply Poe's theory to his fictional practice. He takes the view that the ideal way of judging a writer is to interpret his literary output in the light of his own artistic goals. This view is validated by the coming into prominence of New Historicism which takes into account the historical context of the author, together with his attitude and approach. The seven main chapters of the book—1. Classifications and Interpretations, 2. The Fictional Principle, 3. 'Terror of the Soul': Poe's Gothic Tales, 4. Comic Sense, 5. Rational Stance, 6. The Visionary and the Beautiful, and 7. The Pitfalls of Sustained Narration—convincingly establish the fictional craft of Poe by means of constant reference to his own ideas. In the process the book emerges as a seminal work of its kind.

The third book in the series, *Gothic Resonances: Poe and the Modern American Fiction* (2014), places Poe in the wider context of American Gothic the chief proponents and practitioners of which include Nathaniel Hawthorne and Washington Irving aside from Poe himself. By employing horror as a literary device Poe paints disturbing portraits of human experience. It is perhaps for this reason that Poe has come to be viewed as the originator of detective fiction in America. His writings have thus wielded tremendous influence on modern American fiction. Prof. Ramakrishna offers in this book fresh perspectives on Poe's fiction by objectively evaluating his contribution to modern American fiction and by explicating how his fiction bears gothic resonances.

Prof. Ramakrishna's volume *American Classics Revisited: Recent Studies of American Literature* (1985; co-edited with P.C. Kar), is one of the earliest volumes on American Literature in India that appeared during the heyday of American Studies Research Centre in Hyderabad. It puts together articles by such well known scholars on American Literature as Jerry H. Bryant ("Wright, Ellison, Baldwin—Exorcising the Demon"), Todd M. Lieber ("Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens: 'What to Make of a Diminished Thing'"), Jon Rosenblatt ("Sylvia Plath: The Drama of Initiation"), Mike W. Martin ("*Invisible Man* and the Indictment of Innocence"), and A.N. Kaul ("*The Portrait of a Lady*: Henry James and the Avoidance of Comedy"). It is obvious from the range of articles that are included in the volume that some of the major American writers have been subjected to fresh scrutiny and evaluation.

Another book on Poe edited by him, *Perspectives on Poe* (1996), presents essays by some of the finest Poe scholars, and one even by a novelist, on the significant aspects of Poe's writings. While the leading Poe scholar Burton R. Pollin explains the influence of Poe's writings on modern dance, Prof. Ramakrishna himself focuses on the images of Poe in the works of modern and postmodern American novelists. Other scholars explore other important aspects of Poe: Michael Burdick comments on the influence of Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" on Poe's "Shadow" and "Silence." Bruce I. Winter describes Poe's relationship to American magazines which had the potential to strengthen American democracy. Kent P. Ljungquist explores the influence of certain sources in the *Enquirer* on Poe's satire "Diddling." Benjamin F. Fisher IV writes on the influence of the *Blackwood* articles on Poe and his skill in holding the reader under control in what he calls the 'false-start tales.' Richard Kopley and Michael Singer focus on Thomas Cottrell Clarke's collection of the hitherto unpublished Poe satires. J. Lasley Dameron draws attention to the philosophical import of Poe's concept of truth, Jack J. Voller to the power of terror in "The Fall of the House of Usher," Donald B. Stauffer to Poe's display of classical learning, Joseph J. Moldenhauer to Poe's mysticism, and Richard P. Benton to the essential connection between mathematics and imaginative creation in Poe's tales. The highlight of this book, however, is the novelist John Barth's essay which seeks to explain the influence of Poe's *Pym* on his own novel *Sabbatical: A Romance* (1982).

Pioneering Critic of Indian Writing in English

Prof. Ramakrishna's next major area of interest is Indian Writing in English, both as a scholar and creative writer. There is something unique about his work on Indian Writing in English. At a time when scholars would not touch Indian Writing in English even with a barge pole, he encouraged and practiced this new literature in several ways—as anthologizer, essayist,

commentator, and creative writer. By virtue of this groundbreaking work he certainly joins the ranks of such great Indian pioneers as C.D. Narasimhaiah, H.H. Anniah Gowda, and G.S. Balarama Gupta who promoted research on Indian Writing in English.

The earliest of these works, *Indian-English Prose: An Anthology* (1980), an editorial venture, traces the origin and evolution of English prose writing in India all the way from Raja Rammohan Roy to the 1970s. It discusses how English, although the language of the rulers to begin with, was employed by the natives to convey their nationalistic fervour, and how it has eventually become the medium of communication both within the post-Independence India and around the world. Politicians, diplomats, historians, sociologists, philosophers, journalists, autobiographers, and creative writers, to name a few, have all made extensive use of the language and immensely contributed to the East-West dialogue. The book also notes the transformation of Indian-English prose style from the long-winding and ponderous sentences of the pioneers to the relatively natural and mellifluous expression of the contemporary writers, creative as well as nonfictional. What's more, there has been a distinctly Indian flavour about this writing. The prose writings in this collection thus offer a kaleidoscopic view of India, traditional as well as modern, as seen by Indians either with a native sensibility or with one qualified by their contact with the West. They indubitably serve to present not only a variety of prose styles but also certain relevant issues such as East-West encounter and Indian character—issues that merit serious attention by scholars as well as common readers.

Delving deeper into Indian Writing in English and its production Prof. Ramakrishna came up with another unique work, *Close Encounters with the Muse: Essays and Letters on Indian Writing in English* (1986). This book puts together essays and letters evolving from his personal acquaintance and correspondence with some of the front ranking creative writers of that era, such as Mulk Raj Anand and Nayantara Sahgal. It evidences how his close 'encounter' with the literary giants had helped him appreciate their philosophy leading to a better understanding and appreciation of their works. It is pertinent to observe here that, in this day and age, not many literary critics go the extra mile to get to intimately know the authors they intend to work on or make an effort to understand their philosophy. That Prof. Ramakrishna had done it to his immense advantage puts him in a class of his own.

Prof. Ramakrishna's next book, entitled *Indian Writers on Writing* (2007), is in many ways a continuation of *Close Encounters* in that it contains important statements on contemporary Indian novel in English in the form of letters spanning the 1970s through 2000 by well-established Indian writers in English such as Mulk Raj Anand, Nayantara Sahgal, Nissim Ezekiel, Seshendra Sarma and the new crop of writers. These letters are preceded by a comprehensive survey article which discusses important aspects of Indian Writing in English, and presents the views of Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghose, Vikram Seth and Arundhati Roy. It thus offers an impressive body of ideas propounded by the writers themselves and then frames these ideas in terms of their literary output.

His full-length critical work on Indian Writing in English, unassumingly titled *Critical Essays on Indian English Writing* (2005) contains his twelve essays dealing with various aspects of this body of literature against the backdrop of modern critical trends. The titles of these essays themselves speak volumes for the vast expanse of the area covered: "Contemporary Indian

English Literary Scene,” “Multiculturalism and Indian (English) Literature,” “Indian English Prose Writing,” “A.K. Ramanujan’s Credo,” “Nissim Ezekiel’s Credo,” “Soul-Stuff and Vital Language: The Poetry of P. Lal,” “Mulk Raj Anand on the Novel,” “Anand’s Vision of War and Death in *Across the Black Waters*,” “Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *A Dream in Hawaii: A Study in Postcolonial Spirituality*,” “‘Philosophers and Lovers: Paradox of Experience’ in Shiv K. Kumar’s *The Bone’s Prayer*,” “Technique in the Short Stories of Tagore,” and “From Darkness to Light: V.S. Naipaul’s Indian Odyssey.” It can be discerned from the above discussion that Prof. Ramakrishna endeavours to interpret Indian writers of all descriptions—well-established first generation writers, expatriates, recent entrants into the field—in the light of classical critical models as well as current trends such as multiculturalism, postcoloniality and diaspora studies. This book is also best known for its lucid style and clarity of perception and expression endorsing its own readability and usefulness to scholars.

Multifaceted Creative Writer

A critic excelling himself also as a creative writer is extremely rare. It would take the talent and dedication of the likes of Shiv K. Kumar to tread both the critical and creative paths with equal ease. Prof. Ramakrishna is among these exceptional scholar-writers who have succeeded at both literary criticism and creative writing with great aplomb. His four creative works—two novels and two collections of short stories/sketches—amply testify to this fact. The first of these works, *Sketches and Stories from Melbourne* (2001) is a creative response to his long stay in Melbourne, Australia, and his work as Honorary Fellow in the Department of Culture and Communication of the University of Melbourne. It deals with the Australian and Indian cultures against the backdrop of the city of Melbourne. Its fourteen stories and sketches—1. Majestic Melbourne, 2. Multicultural Melbourne, 3. Back to the Bush, 4. The Green Horror (on Australian bush fires), 5. The Forsaken Damsels (on the neglected Australian children), 6. Single Mom Blues (on Australian single mothers), 7. Thanksgiving (on the social interaction of Indians, Americans and Australians), 8. Mother India (on the Indian surrogate mothers of Australian children), 9. The Overreachers (on Melbourne’s famous Crown Casino as a symbol), 10. Kings in Queen’s Place (on Sikhs in Australia), 11. The Cabbie (on Indian taxi drivers), 12. The Mirage (on Indian lovers in Australia), 13. Perils of El Dorado (on the bashing of Indian students in Australia), and 14. At Home Down Under (on the everyday life of Indians in Australia)—constitute an *omnium gatherum* of anecdotes centred on cultural comingling and lived experience of Indians and Australians in cosmopolitan Melbourne.

With *The Millennial Vision and Other Stories and Sketches* (2008) the scene shifts to India. This book contains thirteen short stories and four sketches. The short stories—1. The Millennial Vision, 2. Application, 3. Middle Class Blues, 4. The Assistants, 5. The Associates, 6. Spirited Scholars, 7. Assignations, 8. The Visitor, 9. The Effulgence of Death, 10. Crossroads, 11. The Child and the Puppy, 12. Amphibious Men, and 13. Apocalypse—creatively deal with the academia, brain drain, unemployment problem, political corruption, and middle-class life, frequently against the backdrop of Andhra, Telangana and Hyderabad City subcultures. The four sketches, i.e., “Sermons in Stones,” “Batukamma,” “Medaram Jatra” and “Dwaraka Tirumala,” too focus on these subcultures and analytically account for their prevalence, persistence and power.

The next two creative works of Prof. Ramakrishna are full-length novels—*Peregrinators* (2013) and *Transfigurations* (2016). The term ‘peregrination’ primarily means a journey in quest for a guru, truth and intellectual and spiritual reality. It could also be associated with human nature and fulfillment of love leading to emotional stasis. The characters of this ‘academic’ novel undertake a peregrination and are therefore aptly called peregrinators. Chandrasekhar, Vijay and Vinay, start their quest for ancient wisdom at the universities in Allahabad and Varanasi. Vijay and Vinay complete their work, but Vinay dies early caught as he is in the vicious tentacles spread by the Master and his coterie of disciples in a rural university in the then undivided Andhra Pradesh. This wicked Master and his henchmen have earlier successfully driven out an *outsider* professor from the university, but Vijay spiritedly confronts them, succeeds in his profession and finally settles down as Assistant Professor of Ancient Indian Civilization in Boston College in the USA.

Chandrasekhar has a different peregrination trajectory altogether. His quest in Varanasi is obstructed by unsavory events resulting in his guru fleeing the country. His quest in Hyderabad too remains incomplete again because of this elusive guru. He eventually completes his work at Wisconsin University in the USA and settles down as Assistant Professor of Ancient Indian Civilization in Camden College near New York City. On the romantic and marital front, although his love for his classmate Vinodini culminates in marriage, she goes back to Allahabad leaving him behind in Hyderabad. Disillusioned and distraught he returns to Nandini, the simple village girl, whom he happened to marry during his immature undergraduate years but abandoned later. He takes Nandini to the US with him and begins his life afresh in Camden. Vinodini meets the couple there, apologizes for causing emotional pain to Chandrasekhar with her inconstancy, and wants to live with the couple. Chandrasekhar and Vinodini are finally reconciled to each other. It should be apparent from the foregoing account of the novel that it deals with the larger concepts of guru and dharma at the intellectual and spiritual levels. The lives of the characters demonstrate how their quests lead to salutary outcomes.

Transfigurations, the second novel, offers an inspirational account of how people’s lives can be improved with selfless work and dedication. It begins with Prasanth and four of his friends reminiscing old times while pacing the campus of the high school where they studied half a century previously. Prasanth, a computer engineer in New York City, his wife Padma and their son Srikanth return to their hometown Helapuri after 30 years in the USA. Inspired by Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi, Prasanth embarks on a mission to improve the lives of the young people in Helapuri and seven nearby villages by means of information technology. Four of his former classmates—Viswanath, Parasuram, Gopal and Srinivas—take voluntary retirement from service in India and join him in the Gandhian experiment. The team starts Helapuri Cybernetics, a software and hardware company, with material and knowhow brought from New York. As business picks up, the directors and twenty company employees start a weekend social service programme to impart free English education and computer training to selected unemployed youth in these villages. The volunteers also participate in the “Clean India” programme to raise awareness among the people about health hazards of pollution.

After receiving training at Helapuri Cybernetics for a couple of years, some village youth put their knowledge of information technology to good use by devising innovative methods of self-

employment apart from assisting their farming families to alter crop patterns, increase production and secure higher price for the produce through online trading. The selfless service of Prasanth and his team is greatly appreciated by the people as well as the government which generously offers financial aid and a certificate of appreciation. In fact, the government suggests that this Gandhian model of rural development should be continued indefinitely, and other areas—rural and urban—should be brought within its purview. There is thus a feel good factor about this novel, which extols the virtues of constructive social work by dedicated individuals.

Perceptive Commentator on Saivism

The last of Prof. Ramakrishna's published works so far is *Continuities* (2018) which is a philosophical and spiritual study of *Saivism* and *Veera Saivism* in India in general and in Warangal in particular since the Kakatiya era (1163-1323). Among other things, it discusses Lord Siva as *Satchidanandaswarupa* as stated in the *Sivapurana*. It exhorts men to cultivate Ananda Yoga in the spirit of Siva while still facing material life of which they are an inalienable part.

Tireless Scholar with Unbounded Spirit

Any review of Prof. Ramakrishna's achievement will be incomplete without a reference to his thirty-four articles many of which have been published in the USA over the years in such highly rated journals as *SPAN*, *The Emerson Society Quarterly*, and *The Explicator* and frequently anthologized. He also contributed chapters such as "Poe in India" to the book *Poe Abroad* edited by Lois D. Vines and published by the University of Iowa Press (1999) in the USA.

In his late seventies now, Prof. Ramakrishna continues to be productive as a scholar and creative writer. In fact, his spirit seems to know no bounds. He is working now on a book with the Indian middle-class as its main theme since he thinks that, although the middle-class is on the rise in terms of economic and political power, it is getting increasingly entangled in difficult problems and dilemmas. One can only wish him success with this book and many more books which he will write for sure in future and thus share his sagelike wisdom with the world.

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